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NON-FICTION | SPRING 2013

See No Evil
By Gillian Pidcock

Harrowden C ward had no view. The far wall of the three-bed bay was one huge wall of glass, but due to construction, the side of the building was covered by scaffolding and plastic sheeting which only allowed a faint sense of the circadian rhythm of life beyond. Day and night were differentiated by a dimming of the artificial lights, giving it the feel of a laboratory in which the subjects were the three ancient gentlemen who awaited their destiny after mild heart attacks. One of them was my eighty-six year old father.

For fifteen years he had refused to leave his apartment. He was perpetually tired and spent most of those years in a leather reclining chair watching golf and game shows on TV or lately, curled up in a fetal position in bed. Being horizontal was his goal and as he lived alone he had his way most of the time, refusing to speak to his daily caregivers or the rare visitor.

The goal of the nurses was to get their patients out of bed and into a chair as soon as possible, to prevent chest infections and bedsores, and then to walk out of the door, unencumbered by trailing IV stands or clutched catheter bags. This was my goal too as the nursing home I had found for him required him to be free of infection. I could not return home to the US until he was safely moved into his new home, where I had promised him there would be a window.

Who would win? I watched in anticipation as each day the familiar struggle played out. When I was there I catered to my dad's needs, making up for all the time I had not been able to visit him. I knew that sometimes he wanted to lie down forever and never wake up. Death did not come easily though. It was prevented by the eager ministrations of the young residents who sat in the corner of the bay in front of computer screens, poring over the data that revealed the inner workings of these still beating human hearts.

One morning I arrived and the nurse's aide pulled me aside.

"Your dad's a character isn't he? He doesn't say much."

"Yes, he sure is," I replied. "Why is he up in the air?"

As we stood in the corridor looking into the bay, we saw my father levitating horizontally six feet above the floor, asleep on the thin mattress, which was jacked up like a cherry picker on slender crisscrossed supports. The aide rushed into the room and grabbed the bed control, lowering it back down, while my dad snored gently.

"Oh My God, he could have fallen out!" gasped the flustered aide. "He was supposed to be in his chair—we always raise the bed up so he can't get back in."

My father, frail and barely breathing, had somehow managed to get his own way. There were two possibilities. Had he stood on the wingchair by the far side of the bed and climbed onto the mattress? Or did he walk all the way around the bed to fetch the hand-control, lower the bed, get in, then raise the bed up again?

"Arthur?" I quizzed the man in the opposite bed. "Did *you* see how he did it?

Arthur, 97, had stabilized nicely and was savoring a clean bed and three hot meals a day. His wizened eyes peered at me over his glasses as he put down his puzzle and shrugged his bony shoulders. He put his hands over his eyes.

"See No Evil" he muttered and went back to his word-search.

Gillian Pidcock, M.S., Narrative Medicine, Columbia University has a background in radiation oncology. "See No Evil" is a memoir-in-progress about a month the author spent embedded in a UK hospital where her elderly parents, separated for many years, were patients after being rushed to the ER within hours of each other.